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Agricultural Biotechnology Annual

Plant and Animal Biotechnology - Annual 2011

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Report Highlights:

This report describes the trade and production of genetically engineered (GE) plant products, the use of GE animals for research purposes, and related government policies in Belgium and Luxembourg.

Section I. Executive Summary:

The Flemish regional government and agricultural sector have a pragmatic approach towards the import and use of genetically engineered (GE) agricultural products, while the Walloon government and agricultural sector have a more negative approach towards agricultural biotechnology. In both Belgian Regions, however, crop trials and commercial cultivation are effectively prevented by cumbersome regulations and the threat of protests from environmental groups. The Flemish livestock sector depends on feed imports from third countries, mainly soybean meal, which for a major part is GE. The Belgian livestock sector does not keep GE animals and nor do, for research purposes, agricultural research institutes.

Section II. Plant Biotechnology Trade and Production:

In Belgium, there are no commercial plantings of biotech crops and no biotech crops under development that will be on the market in the coming year. One field trial is conducted with genetically engineered (GE) poplars. Experimental planting of biotech crops is almost impossible. Crop trials are effectively prevented by cumbersome regulations imposed by the government and by the threat of protests from environmental groups. A large share of agricultural imports from the United States consists of feed products and requires labeling for biotech content under the European Union's traceability and labeling legislation. The slow approval process of new GE events by the European Union has significantly affected U.S. exports to the Benelux region in particular corn gluten feed (CGF) and Distillers Dried Grains (DDG).

Section III. Plant Biotechnology Policy:

The two Belgian Regions, Flanders and Wallonia, are responsible for formulating and implementing coexistence policies. In March 2007, the Flemish government decided upon a framework for the coexistence regulations, which was enforced May 2009. The regulations reportedly guarantee free choice for the farmer to plant GE crops, and include a liability fund. In February 2006, the Walloon government approved coexistence regulations, which were enforced August 2008. According to the Walloon government, the regulations on cultivating GE crops are as restrictive as possible within the scope of the harmonized EU regulations. The regulations contain possibilities to impose "biotech free" zones, and a liability fund paid by the farmer planting GE crops. Sector sources believe that the combination of restrictions will practically ban the cultivation of GE crops in Wallonia. The approach of the Luxembourg government towards the use and cultivation of biotech crops is as restrictive as the regulations imposed by the Walloon government. The Luxembourg government banned the EU approved GE corn events Syngenta Bt176 and Monsanto MON 810 for commercial cultivation.

Section IV. Plant Biotechnology Marketing Issues:

The Belgian Farmers Organization (Boerenbond) is pragmatic and in favor of planting biotech crops; however, points to the resistance of retailers and consumers towards food products containing biotech components, particularly in export markets. The Belgian livestock sector depends on feed imports from third countries, mainly soybean meal, which for a major part is GE. There is no resistance by consumers as this meat produced with biotech feed is not required to be labeled.

Section V. Plant Biotechnology Capacity Building and Outreach:

FAS The Hague has indentified the following strategy for plant biotechnology capacity building and outreach:

- Maintain contact with host country livestock producers on the problem of feed availability. Serve as a ready source of unbiased, scientific information.
- Promote with host government rational policies concerning adventitious presence of non-approved GE events and the acceptability of meat and dairy products from animals fed with GE feeds.
- Nominate appropriate host country specialists for the International Visitors Leadership Program, and utilize other Public Diplomacy programs.
- Work to get U.S. specialists invited to seminars in host countries. FAS The Hague feels that U.S. farmers, producer groups, academics and scientists, are most qualified to objectively address views on biotech in crop production and will be respected by the press and consumers. Arguments by these groups are more difficult for anti-biotech groups to counter.

Section VI. Animal Biotechnology:

In Belgium, there are no GE animals used for commercial use. GE animals are authorized for use as laboratory animal for medical research at universities and academic hospitals. The federal government has a joint responsibility with the two Belgian Regions, Flanders and Wallonia, for authorization of the use of GE animals. The Service of Biosafety and Biotechnology has a coordinating role and advises the government about the safety of using GE animals.